

ISLAMIZATION IN MEDIEVAL EGYPT:
THE COPTO-ARABIC "APOCALYPSE OF SAMUEL"
AS A SOURCE FOR THE SOCIAL AND
RELIGIOUS HISTORY OF MEDIEVAL COPTS

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In spite of the small number of studies on the topic, a consensus of sorts has developed with regard to the question of conversion to Islam in the lands occupied in the first waves of the Islamic conquest. Egypt, for example, is said to have had a majority of Muslims by the end of the 9th century CE. Examining the evidence from Egypt, and particularly evidence from the Coptic community, will perhaps allow us to challenge the consensus as to when the bulk of conversions to Islam in Egypt really took place. Evidence for such a reevaluation is not lacking, and only part of it will be considered here.¹ The Copto-Arabic apocalypse known as the "Apocalypse of Samuel," which has been dated to too early a period, is an important element in this revision. What the evidence provided by this apocalypse means for the history of conversion to Islam in Egypt will, hopefully, become sufficiently clear in the following pages; suffice it to say that it would seem that conversion to Islam was probably not a major issue for Copts until quite a bit later than most historians now assume.

The Coptic Christian apocalyptic literature of the post-Islamic period often includes long passages detailing the conditions which will bring on the End of Times;² as historians, we can infer that some of the elements of these

¹ The evidence from the papyri, for instance, suggests that much of the population was Coptic through the 12th century. See Gladys Frantz-Murphy, "Conversion in early Islamic Egypt: the economic factor," in *Documents de l'Islam Médiéval: Nouvelles Perspectives de Recherche*, Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1991, 11-18. Although a thorough study has yet to be done on the topic, I suspect that we will not find any waves of conversion to Islam in Egypt until perhaps the Mamluk period. On Coptic conversion to Islam under the Mamluks see Donald Little, "Coptic Conversion to Islam Under the Bahri Mamluks," 692-755/1293-1354," *Bulletin of The School of Oriental and African Studies*, Vol. XXXIX, pt. 3 (1976), pp. 552-569. Additional evidence for later conversion is given in Gary Leiser, "The Madrasa and the Islamization of the Middle East: The Case of Egypt," *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt*, 22, (1985), 29-47.

² Francisco Javier Martinez, *Eastern Christian Apocalyptic in the Early Muslim Period: Pseudo-Methodius and Pseudo-Athanasius* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Catholic University of America, 1985) 262.

descriptions reflect the historical situation. The above-mentioned "Apocalypse of Samuel" is noteworthy in this regard.³ Attributed to the Bishop Samuel of Qalamūn, (d. 695 CE), this work expresses the concerns of a church faced with increased Arabization, the alienation of Copts from the Church, and to a lesser degree—with conversion to Islam. These conditions are, of course, construed as signs of the End in this apocalypse.

As historians, we can use a work such as the "Apocalypse of Samuel" as literary evidence for the kind of changes occurring in the Coptic community in Egypt, particularly with regard to the thorny questions of Arabization and conversion to Islam. As for Islamization, most scholars have reached a consensus that the majority of Egypt's Coptic population converted to Islam before the end of the 9th century CE, i.e. within 250 years of the Islamic conquest. This consensus, however, is based on sparse and sometimes misleading evidence. The main literary evidence upon which scholars such as Ira Lapidus have based their conclusions is the report of al-Maqrīzī (writing in the 15th century) that the majority of Copts converted after the end of the last Coptic rebellion in 832 CE. This evidence is coupled with the declining state revenues extracted from the non-Muslim population to account for that population's decline. Richard Bulliet, a key figure in establishing what has come to be the consensus regarding Islamization, draws analogous conversion evidence from Khurasān with less direct supporting evidence from Egypt to conclude that Egypt had a Muslim majority by the mid-9th century. These attempts to pinpoint a period of massive conversion to Islam, however, lack direct evidence and specificity.⁴ Christian Décobert, author of the most recent article on the topic,⁵ has used various Egyptian sources for chronicling this conversion. While he shies away from claiming a specific period of massive conversion to Islam, he does not differ from Bulliet and others in their analysis of when the majority of Egyptian Christians converted to Islam.⁶

What Décobert does do differently, however, is to use, in addition to the

³ The Arabic text is edited and translated into French by J. Ziadch, "L'Apocalypse de Samuel, supérieur de Deir el Qalamoun," *Revue de L'Orient Chrétien*, Deuxieme Serie, Tome X (XX) 1915-1917, No. 4, 374-405, hereafter "Samuel."

⁴ Ira Lapidus, "The conversion of Egypt to Islam," *Israel Oriental Studies* 2, (1972) 248-262. Richard Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History*, Cambridge, 1979.

⁵ Christian Décobert, "Sur L'Arabisation et L'Islamisation de l'Egypte médiévale," *Itinéraires d'Egypte, Melanges offerts au Pere Maurice Martin s.j.* Institut Francais D'Archeologie Orientale Du Caire, (1992) 288. I should point out that Décobert uses many of the same citations from the "Apocalypse of Samuel" which will appear below, but to a different end: to show how far Arabization and Islamization had gone by the 9th century CE, which illustrates the importance and difficulty of dating such a work.

⁶ Décobert, 273-300.

sources used by previous scholars, the well-known but rarely utilized "Apocalypse of Samuel." Nau, in his brief comments following Ziadeh's 1916 edition and translation of the Apocalypse, dates it to the first part of the 8th century.⁷ Much more recently, Décobert⁸ and Francisco Javier Martínez⁹ have both dated this work to the 9th century, with Décobert dating it to the first part of the century and Martínez suggesting a date from the latter part of the 9th century. Based on internal evidence, however, it seems that this apocalypse might be dated to (or after) the Fatimid era in Egypt, and possibly to the time of al-Ḥakim bi-Amr Allāh (996-1021 CE).

The strongest argument for the later dating has to do with the representation in "The Apocalypse of Samuel" of the ruler at the End of Times, who will come if the Christians do not repent of their evil deeds:

If they (the Christians) do not repent, then these (troubles) will remain on the earth until the end of the kingdom of the Hagarenes and to the last king of the Hagarenes. And the last king to rise of the Hagarenes will be named Lasmarīnī,¹⁰ and the number of his name will be 666. Let him who has a heart understand. He will be born of two peoples (*yūladu min ummatayn*) and the earth will be disturbed in the days of his rule. His garments will be the color of gold, and he will act boldly (*wa huwa shajī'un fī nafsihī*). He will send a person to his death for a dinar, and there will not be any respite/peace in his days. There will be no life in his face, and he will forget the fear of God. Nor will he remember God. He will not act according to the laws of his father, for he [his father] is an Isma'īlī, nor the religion of his mother, for she is a Christian (*ifranjīyya*). He will be a friend of drunkenness and a shedder of blood. Many are the troubles which people will receive in his days. He will kill many people suddenly. There will be great distress upon the people in those days. They will await the mercy of God due to the many consecutive disasters which will fall upon them from the sons of Ishmael. After this, the Lord will remember his people who have suffered greatly, so he will send against them [the Muslims] the king of the Rūm . . .¹¹ (from here the apocalypse goes on to describe how the Muslims will be afflicted by punishments 100 times more severe than those they have meted out to the Christians).

While it is not possible to attribute all of the characteristics of this ruler to al-Ḥakim (notably not the accusation that he is a "friend of drunkenness"),

⁷ F. Nau, "Note sur l'Apocalypse de Samuel," *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien*, Deuxieme Serie, Tome X (XX) 1915-1917, No. 4, 405-407.

⁸ Décobert, 287.

⁹ Martínez, 267, and fn. 53.

¹⁰ Jos van Lent, in his forthcoming dissertation on Coptic apocalyptic writings in the Islamic era, has established from the ms. which Ziadeh used, as well as others, that the true reading of this mystifying word is "ism nabihī" with several variant but similar readings in different mss. See also the parallel passage, albeit more developed, in Pseudo-Pistentius. Périce, "Lettre de Pisuntios, évêque de Qcft, à ses fidèles," *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien* 19 (1914) 306-307.

¹¹ Samuel, 389-390.

the fact that his father is said to be an Ismaʿīlī and his mother a Frank, (i.e. a Christian) seems to point directly to the Fātimid ruler al-Ḥākim bi-Amr Allāh (reigned 996-1021 CE). Al-Ḥākim succeeded his father, al-ʿAzīz, and was the son of a Christian woman. Moreover, al-Ḥākim is noted for the lack of leadership he showed in conducting the Ismaʿīlī *daʿwa*. He would take steps to encourage it at one point, followed by steps designed to hamper its success.¹² It thus makes sense that the (Christian) author of the text would be unclear as to how much of an Ismaʿīlī al-Ḥākim really was. But what is really telling here is that the father of the last Hagarene ruler is called, in this text, an Ismaʿīlī. Certainly Décobert and others must have read this portion of the Apocalypse and decided that the reference to an Ismaʿīlī father simply meant that he was a Muslim, for the Muslims are often called Banū Ismaʿīl in the Christian Arabic literature.¹³ In this text, too, the Muslims are called Banū-Ismaʿīl, in the section about what would happen at the End of Time. Until that point, they are referred to as *aʿrāb* (bedouins) or as *al-hajara* (Hagarenes). The term Ismaʿīlī (rather than Banū Ismaʿīl or any other term) is used only once, however, and that is in reference to the father of the last Hagarene king. I have not encountered the use of the term Ismaʿīlī to describe a Muslim anywhere else in the Christian Arabic literature of the Middle Ages. I would submit, therefore, that the use of this term means one of two things. Either reference is being made to a specific Fatimid Ismaʿīlī Imām—apparently al-Ḥākim, or the use of the term *Ismaʿīlī* indicates familiarity with the existence of Ismaʿīlī rulers. In either case, the writing of the apocalypse would have to post-date the coming of the Fatimids to Egypt in 969. The evidence points, therefore, to a date of composition during or after the extremely oppressive portion of al-Ḥākim's reign which ended in 1021 CE.

What has not been noted in scholarly literature is that the portion of the "Apocalypse of Samuel" which is most classically apocalyptic contains very clear parallels to another apocalyptic writing, the XIVth Vision of Daniel.¹⁴

¹² Paul E. Walker, "The Ismaili Daʿwa in the Reign of the Fatimid Caliph al-Hakim," *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt*, Vol. 30 (1993) pp. 161-182.

¹³ See for example "The Arabic life of Shenoute," in E. Amélineau, *Mémoires publiés par les Membres de la Mission Archéologique Française au Caire, 1885-86*, Tome Quatrième, Paris, 1888. This is probably the earliest such usage in Egyptian Christian writings, dating from the late 7th century.

¹⁴ Actually, it is now being noted by Jos van Lent, whose work on the literary topoi in Coptic apocalyptic writing led him to examine the relations between these two works. This work exists in Arabic and Coptic, with the Coptic being a translation from the Arabic. The earliest attempt to identify the figures referred to in this work was that of F. Macler, "Les apocalypses apocryphes de Daniel," in *Revue d'Histoire des Religions* XXXIII (1895) 163-176. Macler concluded that the "XIVth Vision" in its entirety referred to the rule of the Fatimids. In a better-known work, Becker concluded that it was an account of the Umayyads with the last king being Marwan II. Carl H. Becker, "Das Reich der Ismaeliten im koptischen Danielbuch,"

That apocalypse was thought by Carl Becker to have been written around 750, shortly after the fall of the Umayyads and after the defeat of the Coptic rebellion that took place around that time. According to the analysis of Otto Meinardus, however, there are apparently two layers of writing, one datable to the post-Umayyad period, and another datable to the time of the Fatimids.¹⁵ It is this latter portion which has a very clear parallel in the "Apocalypse of Samuel."

XIVth Vision of Daniel

And after this (the reign of the 18th king) there will arise from among them a boy who is his son who is the 19th king of them. He will be born of two races (*yūlad min jinsayn*) for his father is from the sons of Ishmael but his mother is from the Christians (*min al-rūm*).

All the earth will be disturbed in the days of his kingdom, so that a man will be sold for a single dinar.

And he has a face which is not moved with shame and he will forget the fear of God.

He will not remember the law of his father Ishmael, nor that of his mother, for she is a Roman.

He will be hard and drunk at all times.

Apocalypse of Samuel

The last kings of the Hagarenes, and the last king to arise from the Hagarenes' name is Lasmarīnī. The number of his name is 666. Let him who has a heart understand. He will be born from two nations (*min ummatayn*) and the earth will be disturbed in the days of his reign. He will not act according to the laws of his father for he is an Isma'īlī, nor according to the religion of his mother for she is a Christian (*ifranjiyya*).

He will send a person to death for a dinar.

There will be no life in his face, and he will forget the fear of God. Nor will he remember God.

He will not act according to the laws of his father for he is an Isma'īlī, nor according to the religion (*madhhab*) of his mother for she is a Christian. (*ifranjiyya*).

He will be a friend of drunkenness and a shedder of blood.

in *Nachrichten der Königlischen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaft zu Göttingen, Ph. H. Kl.* (1916) 7-57. Meinardus (see note 15) tries to reconcile the two positions. See also the article by Harold Suermann, "Notes concernant l'Apocalypse Copte de Daniel et la Chute des Omayyades," *Parole de l'Orient* XI (1983) 329-348.

¹⁵ Otto Meinardus, "A Commentary on the XIVth Vision of Daniel," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* Vol. XXXII, fasc. II, 1966, 394-449. In a later article, Meinardus changes his opinion and concludes that the XIVth Vision was written entirely at the end of the Fatimid period. Otto Meinardus, "New Evidence on the XIVth Vision of Daniel from the History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* XXXIV (1968) pp. 281-309. Thanks to Jos van Lent for bringing this article to my attention. Meinardus' argument is not entirely convincing, as he tries to reconcile the various rulers mentioned in the XIVth Vision

That there are parallels is unquestionable. Whether one of these sources is reliant upon the other, or whether they both rely on other, possibly orally transmitted, traditions, remains to be established. What does seem clear is that in these passages reference is being made to a ruler whose description is similar to that of al-Ḥākim. Not every aspect of this king fits the Fatimid Imām, but certainly the overall description fits al-Ḥākim better than it does any other Caliph. Moreover, as Meinardus points out, the name “al-Ḥākim,” in the Greco-Coptic numerological system, adds up to 666, which is described as one of the attributes of the ruler at the End of Time.¹⁶

It hardly seems productive to get overly involved in trying to deduce just what events or people are referred to by the apocalyptic passages in the “Apocalypse of Samuel.” But if we accept that the *Terminus Post Quem* of this work is the rule of al-Ḥākim (and this is something which has not been previously suggested) then we can re-think some of our assumptions about the state of Egyptian Christianity up to and in the time of the Fatimids.

The “Apocalypse of Samuel” indicates that the Muslims were a threat to the Christians on two fronts. He mentions that they will persecute the Christians, but more importantly, the Christians will be drawn to the Muslims by their kindness and by the attractiveness of their lifestyle.

Woe from this name which is the Hagarenes and their kingdom, which is opposed to our law (*sharīʿatina*) and the great kings who will rise in their days and the increase of troubles which will be upon the coming generations because the Christians will imitate the Muslims. . . . This people (*Umma*) which is small in number will increase and it will become a great nation, and many nations will become mixed in with them and they will increase as the sands of the sea and as the locusts. Their kingdom will become strong and they will possess many lands, even the far east and the far west (*hatta al-mashāriq wal-maghārib*) and they will possess Jerusalem many times¹⁷. . . . They will live in peace with the Christians for a short time, and then the Christians will envy them their deeds, and will eat and drink with them, and play like them (*yalʿabū mithlahum*) and rejoice like them (*yamraḥū mithlahum*) and commit adultery like them and take unto themselves concubines like them and defile their bodies with the unlawful and impure women of the Hagarenes, and men will have sex with men (*yudājiʿū al-dhukūr*) as they do, and will steal and swear like them and oppress and hate each other and surrender one another to nations which are not merciful. . . . Likewise the women of the Christians also will discard good customs (*al-ʿawāʿid al-ḥasina*) which are for decent women (*allati lil-niswān al-murattabāt*), and they

with the Fatimid rulers, not with great success. What seems more likely, however, is that much of the XIVth Vision was taken from earlier sources, but perhaps compiled after the Fatimids. This implies that his first argument was more correct than the second.

¹⁶ Meinardus, “A Commentary,” 438.

¹⁷ Is this a reference to the way in which Jerusalem was traded back and forth between Muslim and Christian rule during the Crusader period? If so, then at least the latest recension of this text is quite a bit later even than I am arguing.

will become blasphemers and evil people, ignoble of lifestyle, filthy in lusts. They will say also words of blasphemy and there will come from their mouths sayings which none should say, whereby they will blaspheme against God.¹⁸

It is worth noting that the sins for which the "Apocalypse of Samuel" mostly faults the Christians have to do not with conversion to Islam, but with becoming *like* Muslims, and practicing the sins in which the Muslims supposedly indulged themselves. The Muslims, it is said, will live in peace for a short while with the Christians, but then—and this is presented as being the opposite of living in peace—the Christians will lust after the lifestyles of the Muslims. It is this sort of Arabization, with all of its implications of linguistic and social change, which the "Apocalypse of Samuel," and by implication, the church, decried.

The apocalypse goes on to describe how the Copts will leave their traditions:

In those times they will depart greatly from uprightness and they will become like the Hagarenes in their deeds, and they will name their children by their [the Arabs'] names and leave the names of the angels and prophets and apostles and martyrs and they will do something else, which if I inform you of it your hearts will pain you greatly. And it is that they will leave the beautiful Coptic language in which the Holy Spirit has spoken many times through the mouths of our spiritual fathers, and they will teach their children from a young age to speak the language of the Arabs and they will be proud of it. Even the priests and monks will dare, even they, to speak in Arabic, and they will be proud of it, and that inside the sanctuary (*al-haykal*).¹⁹

Even the people of the province of Fayyūm, who excel in Coptic, will forget the language and those in the Ṣaʿīd or Upper Egypt, who do not learn Arabic will face derision:

And they [outsiders] will not know at all that they are Christians, but it would be supposed of them that they are Berbers. And those who remain in the Ṣaʿīd, who know the Coptic language and speak it, will be cursed and mocked by their Arabic-speaking Christian brethren.²⁰

I command you, my beloved sons, and ask of you that you command those who come after you until the completion of generations, that they preserve their souls to the utmost, and that they not permit a Christian to speak Arabic in these places (the sanctuary of the church) for that is a great condemnation [unto them]. For many in those days will dare to speak inside the altar in the language of the Hagarenes. Woc, woc unto those who do so.²¹

¹⁸ Samuel, 377-8.

¹⁹ Samuel, 381.

²⁰ Samuel, 380.

²¹ Samuel, 384.

A second trend visible in this work is the breakdown of the communal function of the Coptic Church. This can be seen in various ways. The "Apocalypse of Samuel" complains precisely about the fact that the Christians are no longer taking part in the communal acts of the church. Perhaps the most important act of communal solidarity for Christians is attending mass. After complaining about the fact that Arabic was supplanting Coptic, the writer of the text says, "And many churches in that time will be empty ruins on the evenings of the Feasts, and on Sunday evenings as well."²² We understand from this that people were not attending services as it was thought they should, even on the important feast days.²³ But simply coming to church individually is not enough for the author of this apocalypse. The Christians must come and celebrate the mass with the rest of the congregation:

They (the Copts) will sit in the streets and in the markets, busy in the matters of the world, and they will not care at all about church nor will it strike their hearts that the chapters (of the readings) are being read, and passing them by. They will even miss hearing the Gospel, but they will only arrive at church at the end of the mass, and some of them will do things which should not be done: they will remain busy in their affairs until the readings have passed them by, and they will attend church and take the Gospels, and find out which chapters were read, and stand in the corner, by themselves, and read, and *create a law of their own*.²⁴

This passage is, in fact, very clearly reliant on Pseudo-Athanasius, a mid-8th century apocalyptic text.²⁵ Here, as elsewhere, however, the author gives a distinct spin to the older text, with his conclusion and judgment that people will "create a law of their own."

Similarly, regarding the important communal act of fasting, the author says, "They will break the fasts which are proper and well-known, and even of those who do fast, some will not complete their fast as is proper, for the sake of gluttony, and they will demand of others that they break their fast with them, for each of them will *create for themselves their own law*."²⁶

The "Apocalypse of Samuel" does note that people will convert to Islam, and that at least some of the conversions will be due to persecution.

²² Samuel, 380.

²³ It should be noted that many of the Eastern churches celebrate the various feasts on the night before the feast day. This is the case for Easter and Christmas.

²⁴ Samuel, 379.

²⁵ "You will see them sitting down at the doors of their homes, on Saturdays and Sundays, forgetful of the Mass in the church, while the body of Christ is spread out upon the altar, and inquiring from those who pass by: 'How far have they gotten in church? Have they said the Psalm? Or have they read the Apostle? Or have they read the Gospel?' They will get up and go to the church. And they will find that they are about to finish the Mass." Martinez, 537.

²⁶ Samuel, 381.

In that time they will deny Christ for a short time which will pass away. Some of them will deny Christ because of the troubles that are upon them, and because of their inability to find somebody to teach them or to comfort them in their troubles, so they will not have the help of teaching. Many other people will fall because of the attraction of the world which has bound their minds to itself. They will not find one to correct them and so they will fall. And some will fall for the sake of the enjoyment of mere food and drink. And some will fall in order to (gain) ease of the flesh and the error of sin. Then their brothers and parents will not cry over them nor be saddened for them but rather they will be proud of them and eat and drink with them. After that, they will envy them and try to become like them and will deny Christ like them. Woe to those who are such as these, for their place in hell will be in the deep pit eternally.²⁷

Several things are notable about this passage. Firstly, the author limits the duration of the period of apostasy, saying that, "they will deny Christ for a short time which will pass away." It seems that the author intends that this apostasy will come at the End of Times. Secondly, although the author of the work is clearly upset by the conversions, what most upsets him seems to be that the community will not come together to condemn the apostates. Even worse, their families will be proud of them, imitate them, and eventually become—like them—Muslims.

Although this passage clearly indicates that conversion was viewed by the church as being a problem at the time of the writing of this apocalypse, it remains the case that conversion *per se* is not the focus of the work. Only the few lines above deal with conversion. The vast majority of the work focuses not on the beliefs of the community (i.e. whether it remained Christian or not) but on its practice, and on its ability to survive without becoming entirely like the Arabs. As we know, it was a battle that the Coptic language and culture would lose, and the Arabic language and Islamic civilization would win. This should not blind us, however, to the fact that this may not have seemed so inevitable at the time of the writing of this apocalypse which we have argued was after the beginning of the 11th century. Although Arabization had clearly won the day in the regions of Cairo and the Delta, and even the Šaʿīd had been seriously affected by Arab colonization, the evidence of the "Apocalypse of Samuel" reminds us that Coptic was still a living language during the Fatimid era, and indicates that conversion to Islam was not yet the most pressing issue facing the church.

²⁷ Samuel, 389.